
CHAPTER SIX: SELECTING AN EVALUATOR

Just as some people presume that anyone can be a teacher or that anyone can be an expert of educational policy, some people believe that anyone can be an evaluator. That is just not the case and any Project Director who works on such an assumption not only endangers the quality of the evaluation effort, but risks being faced with making decisions on poor or incorrect information. The extra time, and sometimes, money it takes to get someone who is properly trained and experienced is well-worth the allocation of resources.

The selection of the appropriate person to be a Project Evaluator is critical to the data collection, monitoring and evaluation tasks that are needed for the management of a project. In an earlier chapter, we briefly touched on the fact that an evaluator can either be external or internal to the project team. In this section, we talk more about the evaluator focusing on the qualifications that are needed and ways to locate competent personnel.

Skills Needed

The evaluator must be knowledgeable of the project's goals and objectives, and must agree philosophically with the mission and the purpose of the project.

This person must be able to apply evaluation expertise to collect data, monitor and evaluate the project. This person must be able to work independently with minimum supervision and to provide consultative advice, when needed. Further, the evaluator must be able to listen and to deal with all participants and stakeholders in a respectful and sensitive way. There is nothing that can kill an evaluation faster than an arrogant evaluation specialist.

The specific skills needed are listed below:

- Has knowledge of evaluation theory and methodology
- Can differentiate between research and evaluation procedures
- Can plan, design, and conduct an evaluation
- Has knowledge and ability to do statistical analyses of data

- Has knowledge and ability to manage and maintain a moderate- sized database
- Has ability to train staff to input data into the database
- Has skills to write and edit brief interpretive reports
- Has experience conducting an evaluation
- Can communicate clearly and effectively with project and program staff and others related to the evaluation tasks
- Has ability to differentiate between what information is needed solely for the project and what information is needed for the program
- Understands and can do formative evaluation.

Although it is not always possible, it is preferable to have the evaluator as a part of the team from the beginning of the project, even before the project is funded at the proposal stage. This not only benefits the evaluator, but also the entire project. An evaluator who is knowledgeable and sensitive to the kinds of information that will be needed to answer the Formative and Summative questions, can set in place the mechanisms for providing the data needed at project outset. Evaluation will not be seen as an “add-on,” as it so often is, and the data gathering can, in all likelihood, be far less intrusive than if it is started at a later date. The fact that evaluators and program implementors may have interests and needs that clash is all too well known. Early establishment of a shared commitment and shared understanding is essential. (In Chapter Five where we present examples of evaluation studies, we illustrate some reasons for having an evaluator on board early on. For more on this issue of the role of the evaluator in new programs and the social conditions that may influence evaluation see Rossi and Freeman, 1993).

Sometimes Project Directors want, or may be pressured, to select as the evaluator someone who has been closely aligned with the project on the program development side—a teacher or curriculum specialist, for example. Assuming the person also has evaluation credentials, such a choice may seem appealing. However, one danger in this route is the strong possibility of a biased evaluation, either real or perceived, taking place. That is, the evaluator may be seen as having too

much ownership in the original idea and, therefore, be unable to conduct an objective evaluation. Indeed, the evaluator herself may feel uncomfortable, torn between possibly conflicting loyalties. Given the stakes that frequently are attached to evaluation findings it is prudent to avoid any apparent conflicts of interest.

Finding an Evaluator

There are many different sources for locating a Project Evaluator. The one that works best will depend on a number of factors including the home institution for the project, the nature of the project, and whether or not the Principal Investigator has some strong feeling about the type(s) of evaluation that are appropriate.

There are at least three avenues that can be pursued:

- If the project is being carried out at or near a college or university, a good starting point is likely to be at the college or university itself. Principal Investigators can contact the Department chairs from areas such as Education, Psychology, Administration, or Sociology and ask about the availability of staff skilled in project evaluation. In most cases, a few calls will yield several names.
- A second source for evaluation assistance comes from independent contractors. There are many highly trained personnel whose major income derives from providing evaluation services. Department chairs may well be cognizant of these individuals and requests to chairs for help might include suggestions for individuals they have worked with outside of the college or university. In addition, independent consultants can be identified from the phone book, from vendor lists kept by procurement offices in state departments of education and in local school systems, and even from resource databases kept by some private foundations, such as the Kellogg Foundation in Michigan.
- Finally, suggestions for evaluators can be obtained from calls to other researchers or perusal of research and evaluation reports. A strong personal recommendation and a discussion of an evaluator's strengths and weaknesses from someone who has worked with a specific evaluator is very useful when starting a new evaluation venture.

Although it may take a chain of telephone calls to get the list started, most Principal Investigators will ultimately find that they have several different sources of evaluation support from which to select. The critical task then becomes negotiating time, content, and, of course, money.

REFERENCES

Rossi, P. H. & Freeman, H. E. (1993). *Evaluation—A Systematic Approach* (5th Edition). Newbury, CA: Sage.